



P-68.00

Before empowerment: residents’ memories of the role of the housemother in diaconal residential care settings in Germany 1945–1995

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Background In the 20th century, houseparent families represented a significant resource in the long-term care of people with mental illnesses and physical disabilities in diaconal care settings in Germany (1-5). In theory, such families could therefore be understood as a type of institutional family: groups which occasionally use familial patterns of reciprocity but are not themselves families. As there is very little empirical material on the function of the housemother, a qualitative study was launched to explore members’ memories of the function of the housemother between 1945 and 1995 and how communal life in the institutional families of the period was possible. This study explores the experiences of people living and working in institutional, family-like care settings in Germany run by the Diaconate, the social welfare organization of the Protestant church (6,7).

Aim As little empirical material on life in institutional families existed, a qualitative study was undertaken to explore the experiences of contemporary witnesses, particularly those who had experienced the duties and responsibilities of housemothers in the second half of the 20th century.

Method The study is based on interviews with people who lived in these institutions and looks at their experiences of a place where carers and people with mental illness lived together. This paper has combined the experiences of residents ($n=8$) and biological children of houseparents ($n=5$) from a qualitative study ($n=42$). The qualitative study took a grounded theory approach according to Strauss and Corbin (8).

Results The results are organized around the two central categories of power and domination. Two main influencing factors were defined: ‘Living in the Institute’s House’ and ‘Personality and Competencies’.



The role of the housemother from the perspective of Bethel Residents
The analysis of the eight interviews with the male residents led to four categories being defined:

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(2) Händler-Schuster, D., Schulz, M., Behrens, J. (2012): [Before Empowerment- residents' memories of the role of the housemother in diaconal residential care settings in Germany 1945-1995](#). *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, Epub ahead of print.
(3) Händler-Schuster, D., Schulz, M., Neumann, R., Behrens, J. (2012): Women's memories of themselves on their journeys to housemother-style roles, 1945–1995. *Geschichte der Pflege- Das Journal für historische Forschung der Pflege- und Gesundheitsberufe*, 2/12. S. 98-106.
(4) Händler-Schuster, D., Schulz, M., Behrens, J. (2011): «...and then I was completely taken by surprise– this was utter pioneer work» Family enterprise systems using the example of the house-mother function –Methodologically Informed by the Principles of Grounded Theory. *Pflegewissenschaft*, Jg. 13 (7). S. 404-412.
(5) Händler- Schuster, D. (2011): Institutional Family Systems and the Role of the Housemother 1945 – 1995. A hermeneutic-interpretive Study of the Retrospective Experiences of Former Housemothers in Homes for “the Sick and Needy” in a Diaconal Institution – Methodologically Informed by the Principles of Grounded Theory Betriebsfamiliale Systeme am Beispiel der Hausmutter-Funktion 1945 – 1995. *Pflege-die wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für Pflegeberufe*, Jg. 24 (4). S. 271-272.
(6) Steinbrück J. (2001) Von der Fürsorge zur Leistung? Neue Personal-(entwicklungs)konzepte in der Sozialen Arbeit am Beispiel der Diakonie, Aachen, Mainz.
(7) Nussbicker R. (2009) Freistatt, Heimerziehung und die Westfälische Diakonenanstalt Nazareth. In: Endstation Freistatt Fürsorgeerziehung in den v. Bodelschwingschen Anstalten Bethel bis in die 1970er Jahre (eds Benad, M., Schmuhl, H.W. & Stockhecke, K.), pp. 217–224. Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, Bielefeld.
(8) Strauss A. & Corbin J. (1996) Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung. Psychologie Verlags Union, Weinheim.

‘Recognition through work and structure’	Work was a central part of all the residents’ daily lives. Working for the houseparents meant that they would receive something in exchange
‘At the mercy of the houseparents: eating as an arena of dependence’	Memories of mealtimes were significant for all the residents. This was revealed by the fact that talking about this topic triggered emotions.
‘Being good and obeying’	The importance of obedience in order to avoid punishment featured in various ways in the interviews.
‘Longing for affection’	The majority of the participants memories show that affection and the desire for friendship represented something important in daily life.

The housemother function from the perspective of biological Daughters
A total of five daughters agreed to talk about their memories.

‘Helping to the best of your abilities – recognition of achievement’	All the interviewees remembered that the housemother had clearly defined duties and responsibilities, predominately related to housekeeping.
‘The housemother as a kind soul’	All the respondents reported that the housemother served as a balance to the often stricter figure of the housefather and took the needs and wishes of the residents into account.
‘Respect’	Mrs G. described how the function of the houseparents in Bethel represented something special and could be compared with that of an authority figure.
‘Supporting each other’	Mrs V. recalled that when residents were not well, her mother was there. For them and offered them support and tea.
‘Obey the rules – or be punished’	The children all reported that obedience was important in Bethel
‘Sacrificing one’s private life’	All the children interviewed recalled a life with the residents which they associated with sacrifice.

Conclusion
The historical concept of houseparents helps us to understand the current discussion about new forms of residential care homes and psychiatric care.

This results appeared in the July 5st, 2012 issue of the Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing